

Sept. 8 (Bloomberg) -- Rick Larsen and Mark Kirk are swimming against the congressional current. In a House of Representatives where many lawmakers are suspicious of China's mounting economic and military power, they advocate engagement.

Kirk, an Illinois Republican, and Larsen, a Washington Democrat, have backed up their advocacy by heading the 59-member U.S.-China Working Group. Since starting the caucus in 2005, they've sought to illuminate issues affecting relations ranging from the value of the yuan to tainted pet food.

Larsen and Kirk have organized trips to China and set up meetings between lawmakers and officials including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. And they're having an influence on their colleagues' attitudes, China watchers say.

"They've managed to make it okay not to be a knee-jerk anti-China person," says Charles Freeman, a former U.S. trade negotiator and now a fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington research group. "That's quite an achievement."

The caucus contains roughly equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans. Members include Maryland's Chris Van Hollen, 50, who oversees fundraising and elections for House Democrats, and Dan Burton, 71, an Indiana Republican who voted in 2000 against expanding China's trading privileges and accused it last year of turning "a blind eye" to "brutal regimes" in Iran, Burma and Sudan.

"We don't ask people to love or hate China; we don't ask folks to be panda huggers or dragon slayers," Larsen says. "We'll even accept panda slayers into our group."

## Low Point

Kirk, 49, and Larsen, 44, started the coalition at a low point in the economic relationship between the two countries, after state-owned CNOOC Ltd., China's biggest offshore-oil explorer, failed in a 2005 bid to buy Unocal Corp. following an uproar in Congress over the purchase. Unocal is now part of San Ramon, California-based Chevron Corp.

Congress's relationship with China had been testy for decades, highlighted in the 1990s by annual debates about the country's status as a trading partner and condemnations of its human-rights record.

The caucus gave the Chinese a "point of entry" for discussions "that was not adversarial," says Dennis Wilder, Asia director for the National Security Council under George W. Bush. Kirk and Larsen demonstrated that some lawmakers were "willing to sit down and reason through the problems in the relationship."

## Presidential Schedule

Kirk says his 20 years in the U.S. Navy helped spark his interest in China. A commander in the reserves, he regularly reviewed Bush's schedule as president and says he was "stunned" at the number of meetings and phone calls with Chinese leaders.

Larsen's China focus comes in part from Boeing Co.'s aircraft-assembly operations in western Washington. The Chicago-based company helped make his constituency first among all 435 congressional districts in exports to China last year, with \$4.1 billion in shipments, according to the Washington-based U.S.- China Business Council.

Larsen has traveled to China five times and Kirk, seven. They've met with officials including President Hu Jintao and People's Bank of China Governor Zhou Xiaochuan.

One caucus member, Arkansas Democrat Vic Snyder, 61, says the group and its leaders have been a factor in making congressional rhetoric on China "less inflammatory" in recent years. "They are one snowflake" in the "snowball" of relations, he says.

### Military Hotline

Besides trying to affect the climate of debate, Kirk and Larsen have influenced specific measures. During a 2006 visit to China, they encouraged officials to approve a military hotline after the Chinese stalled on a 2004 U.S. proposal.

They made clear during a meeting with then- Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan "the importance that members of Congress attached to establishing the link, and they sustained their interest and their active encouragement" until the hotline was announced in 2007, says Wilder, now a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Kirk, through his seat on the House Appropriations Committee, helped push through funding for a new U.S. consulate in Wuhan, a Yangtze River city of 9 million. Now he's trying to open 10 posts costing \$1 million each in smaller Chinese cities to help promote U.S. exports.

### Government Borrowing

He drew criticism from colleagues for remarks he made on a recent trip. Kirk related to a Washington audience June 8 that he told Chinese leaders the U.S. budget "should not be believed" because Congress will spend "quite a bit more" and government borrowing will increase. China holds \$776.4 billion in U.S. Treasuries.

“I was troubled by Kirk’s remarks in China that you can’t trust the U.S.,” says Illinois Democrat Phil Hare, who isn’t a caucus member. “I think he stepped over a line.”

Kirk couldn’t be reached for comment. His spokesman Eric Elk said his remarks reflected “what American and Chinese readers see daily in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal,” according to a June 11 Washington Post article. “As China lent more and more to the U.S., its leaders are getting used to watching Congress spend much more than expected.”

Still, Van Hollen says, the caucus has been effective in making lawmakers “more aware of the strategic nature of the U.S.-China relationship. People have a multidimensional view of China now and a more nuanced view.”